

INTERVIEW WITH W. M. MCLEAN

By Goldie F. Wells

Goldie: I am in the home of Mr. W.M. McLean in Raleigh, North Carolina. He was a principal of a school in Wake County in the year 1964. The date is January 12, 1991. Mr. McLean would you introduce yourself and say that you know that this interview is being recorded.

Mr. McLean: I am W.M. McLean, former principal of Fuquay Consolidated High School. I came here to Wake County in 1953, and this is to certify that this is being recorded with my permission.

Goldie: As you know I am doing some research. I am talking to Black high school principals who were principals in 1964, and those who were Black high school principals in 1989. I'm trying to do a comparison to see if they perceive the role of principalship the same way.

Goldie: I want you to tell me how you became a high school principal?

Mr. McLean: Well, before becoming a high school principal I taught about four years in the Roseboro High School down in Sampson County. After that I was promoted to become principal of Garland High School in Sampson County about 1942. From then I stayed with the high school before moving to Wake County.

Goldie: You were in Wake County and you served there how many years?

Mr. McLean: I served in Wake County as a principal probably about 15 years.

Goldie: We're concentrating on the year 1964, and I want you to tell me about Fuquay Varina a consolidated high school. Tell me about the size and how many teachers you had at that time.

Mr. McLean: Well at that time as I said I was asked to come to the Wake County School System. I came to the commencement exercise in 1953, to see what it was going to look like at Fuquay Consolidated Schools. Mrs. McLean was with me and a former teacher from Raleigh that taught with me in Garland and of course I was amazed when I looked at the school to see that they only had 17 graduates in that particular year and yet it was one of the larger high schools in Wake County. Somewhat disappointed I met the superintendent here. He asked me to meet him here on a Saturday to look at the facilities. We looked at the facilities very fully; we had one new high school building, home economic department, very

poorly equipped and at this showed me because of the poor attendance and the dropout there was a big job to be done in this school. Maybe if I had not signed the contract, I might not have stayed but I signed a contract and I came here and been the principal of this school for about 15 years. I left this school system to become principal of an elementary school, Lincoln Heights in the same community but we needed additional campus space. So that is about how I came to Fuquay and what happened. My big objective when I came here was to do something about dropouts and something about pregnant young females. I could tell that was what had happened because that is where the children were constantly dropping out. We feel that we were able to do something about both of those objectives in the Fuquay Consolidated Schools. Our students have done very well. We have students who are outstanding. The fellow that lives next door to me is my former student and his wife is my former student.

Goldie: What do they do now?

Mr. McLean: One is high up in the department of corrections and the young lady is teaching.

Goldie: Now when you came in 1953, just to observe you said that there were just 17 graduates. In the year of 1964, how many graduates did you have?

Mr. McLean: In the year 1964, I think we were getting somewhere around 72 high school graduates.

Goldie: How many teachers did you have then?

Mr. McLean: I had seven high school teachers and you can see why I had seven because we didn't have two hundred high school students. That was when I first came here. Then we moved on up to about 72 or more graduates with 18 high school teachers.

Goldie: This was a union school so you had elementary students too.

Mr. McLean: It was a union school 1-12.

Goldie: I wanted to ask you some things about the school and your responsibilities and how you dealt with them. Can you tell me how you supervised personnel and how you selected your teachers?

Mr. McLean: Well, I put forth a great effort to get strong teachers. Strong teachers is the key to your administration. They accused me of interviewing about two hours before we could get together on who would be our next teacher that we were trying to get. Because my philosophy was this. If you

can help us do what we are trying to do here at Fuquay, I'll be happy to have you take the position. If you feel that you cannot do it, don't bother with it. So that is my philosophy and maybe I do take a long time but it took awhile to get the kind of people that you wanted to get in the position.

Goldie: Once you got them how did you supervise them? How did you make sure that they were doing a good job?

Mr. McLean: Well, I'm one of the principals that frequently visits the classroom and it wasn't left up to the assistant principal, I was the one that visited the classroom. So I believe in accountability. I believe that you owe something to your job. I think that is one of the troubles now that somewhere we have lost that. Now we are doing something about the report card programs, the basic program that the legislators approved, and I do hope that it is going to give us a better situation. We must be accountable.

Goldie: So you did have an assistant principal when you were principal?

Mr. McLean: Well, I did have an assistant principal the latter part of my year.

Goldie: And you just took a lot of time and selection of your teachers. What about curriculum and instruction?

Mr. McLean: We fair very closely to curriculum and instruction. You know we went through Southern Association for the high schools because after I went to the elementary school we went through the association as a county-wide. We didn't go through school by school, it was a county-wide program in high school and elementary school. And then we constantly looked at our curriculum because your curriculum must kind of fit into your goals that you are working in your high school or in your school in general. So that is what happened with curriculum. We thought we had a good curriculum. I think I can show you something that Dr. Duncan, did you know Dr. Duncan? Dr. Duncan has notated in some material here that our philosophy of the high school at Fuquay was one of the finest that he had ever seen and you know that he covered. He was a supervisor of the high schools for the state and what he liked most about it is the way that we said we are going to implement it because I've had any number of principals--evidently he has said that to a few principals and I had any number of principals request to see the philosophy of Fuquay Consolidated Schools.

Goldie: Do you see yourself as the instructional leader?

Mr. McLean: No doubt about that.

Goldie: What about discipline?

Mr. McLean: No problem particularly. When I came to Fuquay there were a lot of windows broken and as I stayed in Fuquay and I live right across the street from the school. At the end of my period at Fuquay the fellows that put in windows as I left Fuquay they said we put in more windows since you left Fuquay than we put in while you were at Fuquay. But on a Monday morning I would always walk across the street to school expecting to see if any windows were broken and some windows were broken when I first came to Fuquay. But by the time I left Fuquay no windows were broken.

Goldie: Do you attribute this to your strong teachers that you didn't have discipline problems?

Mr. McLean: No I contribute it to this set of students that would break windows. Today they have more respect for their school and therefore they are not breaking windows. That group is out and gone--that group. They passed on. But the group that we are working with now, no they're just not breaking windows.

Goldie: I need to back up a minute. When you selected those teachers after you interviewed with them did the superintendent usually go along with the person you recommended?

Mr. McLean: He always went along with the people I recommended.

Goldie: Did you have much supervision from the superintendent or did he leave it to your discretion?

Mr. McLean: From the central office? No, I was in charge of supervision, and when you are in supervision you do what you choose.

Goldie: What about transportation?

Mr. McLean: Back in those days when I came to Fuquay principals routed their own bus routes. Principals played some part in selection of perspective bus drivers. Today you know, somebody takes care of transportation.

Goldie: Utilization of funds.

Mr. McLean: Utilization of funds was very flexible. We had a budget, the county had a budget, and all of the schools in Wake County had a budget that would come out of the big budget. Of course, it was very flexible. You had to keep books and audit them and your books went into the central office at the end of the school year to be audited. That's how they worked the budget.

Goldie: Do you think that you were adequately funded?

Mr. McLean: I don't think we were adequately funded. Not to start with. I think that I had an advantage in some ways that I was asked to come to Wake County. Of course a lot of things--we lacked a lot of equipment but the superintendent was pretty nice about getting those things. I maybe had to go see him and say, Mr. X, you told me that you were going to look out for this and you were going to look out for that and I'm here to see that you try to get these things. We need a lot of things in the home economics room so we didn't always have that flexibility with the budget. That came on after I had been here about five or six years but when we had a budget and you knew what your budget was and it was an itemized budget and you knew that you had to go to certain areas to keep the books straight. You couldn't just turn money from here over to this project without consulting somebody so that is the way the budget worked and we had no trouble with it and we lived up to the budget. I can remember when we went to this new school and I was a high school principal there. We had a gymnasium and they had gotten some soft seats out of the central office where we had principal's meeting so they sent those used seats down to Lincoln Heights School and then I reminded the local board, we call them the Advisory Board now, along then you called them the local Board of Education, and I remember when they sent the seats down and I remember going to the local board and saying when you get a new building you are supposed to have new furniture. They got with the philosophy so I've got seats down in Lincoln Heights that are not new. The secretary of the Advisory Council immediately got on that and reminded Mr. Massey to take the old seats and put in the new seats.

Goldie: But when you were at the consolidated school did you frequently get used furniture or books?

Mr. McLean: No, never any used books. That sounds more like Sampson County. Not at the county schools--when I was at the high school I ran into this situation. Because at the high school in the curriculum we put in commercial education. This school is a large high school but they didn't have commercial education. We went out and got about 20-30 used typewriters, supplement typewriters and we had all of them reconditioned and we started our commercial education and then we needed some furniture. So they brought a load of furniture from somewhere and told us this is your furniture and I sent it back. After the boy got back with it at the central office, I guess within about an hour or more here comes the superintendent. He picked up the chairman of the Wake County Board of Education, Mr. Proctor who was from Fuquay. They came down and they said, why did you send the furniture back? I said, because I thought surely we would have new furniture even if you had to make it in the shop. And Tom Proctor was the Chairman of the Board of Education. He is deceased now. He didn't say a word and before I left

Fuquay I was teaching Tom Proctor's grandchildren in an elementary school so then it wasn't too long before I got new furniture. Same thing happened with a bed for the health room. They sent me down an old dilapidated bed for that room and I sent it back. So it has worked like that all of the time. When I went up to Lincoln Heights now of course it was a brand new school only we didn't have furniture for like kindergarten children. We didn't have the varied kinds of furniture and I remember when I asked about that and I remember Mr. X saying, now we are not going to make a show place out Lincoln Heights. He thought I just wanted to have a show place. But after that I understood the superintendent. He came to Garland. He could see what we had in Garland. We had a nice little school. And I guess he was ashamed or something. I brought him a bookcase from Garland and this fellow said you didn't have to bring these. These were my homemade bookcases. You didn't have to bring those bookcases up here. He was ashamed of the way the whole school was looking. So that is what happened there. I didn't have any trouble after I established that.

Goldie: Had you worked with the superintendent down in Sampson County?

Mr. McLean: Oh yes. Didn't you read the letter about him.

Goldie: When he moved up here did he ask you to come up here with him?

Mr. McLean: No.

Goldie: Had you worked with the Wake County Superintendent? Well, I saw the fine recommendation he gave you.

Mr. McLean: The reason I wanted to come to Wake County, my wife had a farm that she had to supervise in Wake County. They had lived in Jersey for the last forty years so really I wanted to come to get out of Garland. I thought as far as cultural things it offered a little bit for our little daughter so that encouraged me to come this way. Wake County being a big educational center but there was a lot of prejudice in the system people tell me even before I got here. So no, I had never worked with him until I got here.

Goldie: But he just knew you knew what to do and he respected that.

Mr. McLean: Now you can see that if you read some of those reports from Dr. Duncan, etc. You might want to look at this before you go. This is a part of my philosophy. I found this in my papers after my wife died. Evidently she put it in there because I can't remember getting it from anybody.

Goldie: Tell me something about cafeteria management?

Mr. McLean: Well, we didn't have any trouble there in the high school. The ladies, Mrs. X, she is deceased now, and we didn't have any trouble at all. Now this school was under my supervision. Lincoln Heights was under my supervision before it became a standard high school and I'll tell you that story. He had gone down around Rocky Mount, Superintendent X, and he had seen transportation of food from a central kitchen somewhere in Rocky Mount and they are still using that--moving that food to different schools. Do you have that?

Goldie: Yes, we sure do. It's called satelliting. We have ladies who drive vans and they have these containers that can hold the heat and they pack up and certain schools do the baking and certain schools do the food and they have ladies who get it to the schools.

Mr. McLean: But anyway, I had it. But we didn't have any trouble in the management part of it. But what happened I knew a lady on the Board of Education from Fuquay and she was determined that we were going to make Lincoln Heights School a full counter cafeteria and not haul the food from down here up here. So she got on the superintendent's back and she was pretty influential and we got all we needed and more than we needed in equipment to make Lincoln Heights a full-time cafeteria. Everything that we needed. But now I liked to have gotten in a little trouble because he knew that lady was working with me to get that.

Goldie: So he figured you were behind the whole thing. What about your buildings and grounds?

Mr. McLean: Beautiful.

Goldie: I saw Lincoln Heights. A pretty picture.

Mr. McLean: Well, the grounds were good down there because we started beautifying the grounds. The building wasn't that pretty but we started beautifying the grounds before I left the consolidated school. So what we had was pretty and things like that.

Goldie: Were you in charge of it or did you have someone come from the central location. Not then but someone comes from the central office today. When you first came but in '64 had you moved up to having somebody to check it for you?

Mr. McLean: You got no help from the central office.

Goldie: When you first came in '53 that school was just about yours to do what you wanted to do with it, wasn't it?

Mr. McLean: I think you could. I reckon you could. I think

that if they could see that you knew what to do with it then it was yours. Of course, if you will look through some of that and you'll see we had merit, a little merit pay and you'll see that I got merit pay but whatever little it was at that time.

Goldie: Your school's relationship to the community.

Mr. McLean: Our school's relationship to the community was good. I think that is why we didn't have broken windows because the relationship was good. Now maybe when I first got here but it began to get better and better. I remember an old fellow even when I came to Fuquay he found me a place to stay right in front of the school and I thought I had a lot of property around there so he gave up his house. That was his house when he was there so he went on down and built him another house and gave me this house. But I remember this old gentleman, I don't know what happened, but anyway somehow or another he figured all of you principals are alike and maybe something that the other principal had been emphasizing what we needed to do here I am doing the same thing. So he could see that. I'm one of those principals who believe if you show that you are interested in the community then the community will have an interest in you. Back then you had polio drives, and all of these kinds of drives and what have you and you had to go to these people and ask for support. So I'm one of those who believe that you attend community churches. I wouldn't do it today because they got the integrating and if you can't do it for one you certainly can not ask Black people to go to churches if you can't make the Whites. But I'm one of those that believe that you show some interest in your community by letting your face be seen occasionally at their activities. You can't do that today either but back then it really paid off. That is how attendance came up to over 300 and some or every church that I would go to they would ask me to make a little statement and I would talk about drop-outs, I'd talk about attendance.

Goldie: How much administrative power and control did you have over your school and your responsibilities?

Mr. McLean: I had good support.

Goldie: Did you feel that you had control and power over that school?

Mr. McLean: Yes. For instance here is a lady that knew somebody was on the local board of education and they had written an application. This was a Black lady and she was writing a White person, and whenever the man approached me about her I took it into consideration. In the meantime I got busy to get some references so I knew whenever he approached me and he didn't try to dominate me but he just approached me

about Miss X, somebody that he knew and I knew that that person wasn't the person for the school so no, I had the last word. Same thing happened to another member of the Board of Education. He had a sister teaching down at Fayetteville and she wanted to come back home to Fuquay. Now this fellow was on the Board of Education too but I didn't accept her. She had been teaching down that way a long time and I didn't accept her but yet he had power in Fuquay and he could have started something rolling but that is just the way it was.

Goldie: She couldn't help you with your program.

Goldie: How did desegregation of schools affect your role as a principal?

Mr. McLean: I don't know. Well, maybe I can look at it this way--you see I was at the elementary school a good while after I left the high school and when integration came to the high school I had left the high school.

Goldie: You were at the elementary school. Well, how did it affect your role there?

Mr. McLean: I don't know that it affected it as I can think of. I still had control. I still had all of that cafeteria that you talked about. I still would recommend teachers that they accepted at the central office. You know you have a file over there and you thumb through the application and you pick out one. When it comes to integration I can remember this and it may give you some idea of how it happened. In my last year or two at Lincoln High School this big head of personnel called me one day and said. Mr. McLean I believe you are a little top heavy in Black teachers, you have a little more than we'de like for you to have--whatever it is 24% or 23%. Whatever it is, I had more than that. I said Mr. Williams I could be a little top heavy but I'll tell you what we'll do. Whenever you find some of those principals out there, and I meant majority principals out there, White principals who haven't got their quota, when you find some of them then I will switch some of mine with them. I didn't hear from Mr. Williams again.

Goldie: You have to get up early in the morning to get by you!

Goldie: Did you find any difference in the supervision of the teachers when you acquired some White teachers, did you treat them any different?

Mr. McLean: No, I treated them all the same. Mrs. Proctor used to say, One thing about you, Mr. McLean. You fed them all out of the same spoon.

Goldie: Do you know Mr. Creacy? Down in the eastern part of

the state.

Mr. McLean: No, I never did know him. Was he the minister? He was a legislator one time, wasn't he? I know his younger brother.

Goldie: How did you enjoy your job?

Mr. McLean: I enjoyed my job very much. I enjoyed it because I could see progress. Even at Garland I could see progress. At Garland I had about a 15 teacher school. At Garland we were graduating 30 students. When I came here this was about a 35-40 teacher school and they were graduating 17 so you can see I enjoyed my job.

Goldie: What do you consider the major problem of your principalship?

Mr. McLean: My major problem could have been the lack of delegating responsibility. That could have been and maybe I was one of those that think I have to have my hand on everything. But I was getting results.

Goldie: As long as you were getting results that was what was keeping you going. What do you consider the most rewarding thing about your principalship?

Mr. McLean: Well, it may go right back to that getting results. It might go right back to that and of course there are so many letters and things that you could see here that would tell you that. In other words if you would thumb through this book you would see where Dr. Duncan probably recommended me to at least four positions. You see where right in Sampson County I was at Garland and where I was offered the principalship of Sampson County training school the big school right there in the city but I didn't see any need to go in there when that wasn't where I wasn't assigned to go. I was assigned to come this way. But that information is here.

Goldie: Back in 1964, there were over 200 Black high school principals. When I called to the State Department last year to get a list of all the Black high school principals I got a list with 41 on it and some of those were not principals of traditional high schools. Some of them were principals of alternative schools so there were less than 40 in 1989. With that situation now the way it is if you knew of a Black male or female that aspired to be a high school principal what kind of advice would you give to that individual?

Mr. McLean: Well, that is something to think about. I guess a lot would have to do with where the system happens to be and what kind of support you are going to get in your system because there is still a lot of prejudice out here. It's

like this. The big trouble is what is handed down to you from the central office. Now my head of personnel used to tell me, Mr. McLean, these White principals don't even go out and look for anybody. They thumb through and get the people they want, they recommend them and that's the way it is. And if you're not smart enough if you've got a vacancy, if you're not smart enough to know somebody that you need to go on the staff that would go a good job, then you don't get them but if you've got somebody say well, here is one I think if you would approve I think this one would do. So it depends on you I guess and whether all systems are the same or not and I don't know but there are a lot of different things going on out there.

Goldie: Well, are there some skills you think that a young administrator needs to have?

Mr. McLean: Well, there are some skills that he needs to have. He needs to really know where he is going and then I guess he has to figure out how he is going to get there.

Goldie: You said something before we started to interview about just being an administrator. What do you think about the principalship? You are what we call one of those principal's principal. You know one who has seen a lot of changes take place under your administration. Seeing a lot of progress. What are some little sayings that you had to keep you going when you were an administrator?

Mr. McLean: Prayer. I offered a lot of prayers and walked cautiously. Try to do your best when you get out there. Don't give somebody something to hit you over the head with because they are looking for something and they will find it if they can.

Mr. McLean: I'm pretty proud of this but it's not in Wake County, not in '64. We had the highest ranking student with 74 high school participating in the Pepsi Cola Scholarship Program and of course we had the winner. There were a lot of big schools and this gal is doing well too. She didn't just do this and kinda drop off but she is doing well today.

Mr. McLean: I guess I was considered a firm principal and a lot of my children said, Mr. McLean, you tried. Maybe we didn't turn out but we tried.

Goldie: Do you see many of your students?

Mr. McLean: Quite often because I go back to Fuquay quite often.

Goldie: Mr. McLean, I want you to tell me what happened to Fuquay Consolidated School. I know that you were over at the new school, Lincoln Heights, at that time. But what did

happen to that school.

Mr. McLean: Well, that is a good question and what happened there is what happened to a lot of schools throughout the state. First, the principal who was at Fuquay Consolidated School was asked to go over to the old former White school as principal with his merger of grades 7-12 and with a similar situation over at the White school. He stayed over at that school for about two or three years. In the meantime they were building a brand new very expensive, beautiful high school for the integrated situation and then that principal was over at Fuquay Consolidated School was called in to the Central Office as an assistant superintendent and in this new pretty high school down at Fuquay was taken in by a majority person. We had another situation like that in the county when they built a brand new high school in the Garner area and then when they integrated then they sent this fellow to head up the Fellow Program for Wake County Schools. Took him out of his school and sent him to head up the Fellow Program for the Wake County Schools and the minority person went into the Central Office. And that happened throughout the state.

Goldie: What happened to the building? Did they discontinue the use of that building, make a community center or tear it down or what?

Mr. McLean: At the immediate time the building had just been phased out for about two years. Then they had grade level 4 & 5 at the old Fuquay Consolidated School. It was headed up by a member of the majority race.

Goldie: How many Black principals do you have in the county now--in Wake County?

Mr. McLean: Two. I told you about Johnny Farmer when he retired.

Goldie: Then we have a Mr. Hix in Wake Forest. Mr. Richard Hix.

Mr. McLean: Are you getting that contrast? It's going to be interesting.

Goldie: It is going to be interesting. I have already enjoyed it.

Mr. McLean: Now, I met this fellow, Mr. Hix, for the first time whenever we retired at our church. We organized a back-to-school workshop at Montreat Church and it is still operating about 10-12 years ago and I met Mr. Hix because a lot of times they would bring in people as consultants. When I was crying all the time that they took our only Black principal, Mr. Hix at Wake Forest.

Goldie: Do you think that the disappearing Black role model principal as a role model has had any effect on our Black males.

Mr. McLean: Definitely. Even this has happened. I was reading an article in the kitchen there. Our perceptions are twisted up and we may feel good about ourselves but in it you have a faulty, unreal perception you may feel good about drugs, these things and you think that you are going to make it but your perception is tangled up. It is all tangled up. A lot of these kids out here that say, oh, man I'm going to make it but I don't even know I am going in the wrong direction. If I'm going to make it I'm going to make it that way.

Goldie: What did you do when you had fellows that had the wrong idea?

Mr. McLean: Talked to them. And today if I was working in the schools volunteering it would be on a one-to-one. You can't do much with a gang. You have to do it one-to-one.

Goldie: Some of the principals have told me that they use that old assembly. When things weren't going right all they had to do was call them to assembly and they would get things straightened out. Some of them served beyond the desegregation and they said that was taken away from them. They couldn't do that anymore. They couldn't talk to them.

Mr. McLean: We had assembly every Monday morning. We discussed and here we, Phil Freeman, the fellow that was writing that article he was a guidance counselor, told us the number of educational symptoms right here in our doors. He said that was Fuquay's trouble. Right down at Fuquay they weren't taking advantage of anything.

Goldie: Is he Mr. Freeman's brother from down in Nash County. He came from Nash County but he is up at Burlington.

Mr. McLean: Mr. Freeman's brother is up at Burlington? He has one that I thought was at Fayetteville. He has another one that ran into some trouble about the Sheriff but he must not be. Probably a different Freeman. They are from down around Nash County.

Goldie: This has really been an interesting interview and I appreciate you taking the time to sit back and share some of your memories with me and some of your memoirs and your memorabilia and I am hoping that when I finish this research that some of the things that you have shared with me will be a help to some of the young administrators that are coming along. I have learned a lot from you. I've seen enough to know that you were well thought of and a man of integrity and as you said you fed them all out of the same spoon.